

As new franchising rules are considered, a number of market realities must be taken into account. There is a distinct lack of independent programming, particularly local independent programming, on cable systems. This is largely the result of vertical and horizontal consolidation among the largest media companies and cable providers. We are required to buy channels we don't want or need because the cable operators bundle them together. The quality of customer service often reflects the fact that cable television is not a competitive market. The mere presence of satellite providers does not drive down rates nor present an affordable alternative for

broadband access.

In many communities, the only truly independent sources of local news, information and culture come from the public channels produced at community media centers. They are the only way many citizens see local government in action and often the only way residents get information about events happening close to home. Some towns have been able to negotiate for funding to enhance and expand these resources. Others have obtained wired schools and libraries, resources for e-medicine, government efficiency programs and other educational initiatives. All use their negotiating power to ensure the entire community is served.

The risk of supplying "one size fits all" franchises to new providers is the elimination of these and other valuable services that fulfill important public policy aims. There is surely a need for new providers of broadband and video content to enter existing markets, be they private or public.

However, no matter the level at which 'franchises' to new providers are granted - be it local, state, or national - local communities cannot be cut out of the process. They must be allowed to lend their voice to how new video and broadband systems will be implemented and what features will be available to meet future needs.

Local communities' role is to negotiate

in the interest of  
their resident  
consumers of video  
and broadband  
services with  
providers to control  
providers' charges  
to individual  
consumers and the  
quality,  
accessibility, and  
responsiveness of  
the providers of  
such services to  
every person whose  
airwaves they rent.  
Local communities  
have the duty and  
responsibility of  
protecting  
individual citizen  
consumers against  
claims made upon  
them for private  
services which  
depend for their  
existence on the use  
of the citizens'  
resources. Federal  
regulation must  
insure that local  
government is  
empowered and  
enabled to fulfill  
its responsibilities  
to its citizens.  
Local government  
must retain and  
wield its bargaining

power in order to derive the maximum benefit for its citizens from private entities which use those citizens' resources. Control of the airwaves must be subject to local community control as much as possible.

New broadband services offered by vertically and horizontally consolidated media companies and cable providers already limit consumers' access to independent, local sources of news and information. If local communities are cut out of the process of rolling out these services, individual citizen consumers have little hope of shaping the form in which such services are provided, such as unbundling unwanted channels from desired ones with commensurate

change in price.

Without local  
government input, a  
truly competitive  
market which works  
rightfully to  
consumers' advantage  
is even less likely  
develop.